

Officials: Troubleshooting Montgomery voting on track

■ But County Council members
aren't sure election officers
are taking responsibility

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Montgomery elections officials are guaranteeing a smoother time at the polls in November, but some County Council members still question whether they have accepted responsibility for the problems that sparked an audit.

Elections board President Nancy H. Dacek and elections director Margaret A. Jurgensen discussed their plans to resolve the problems that plagued the Sept. 12 primary. On their list of advances are plans to retrain election judges, order more provisional ballots for each precinct and devise an emergency communications plan between elections headquarters and the county's 238 precincts. The county's chief administrative officer, Bruce E. Romer, has already pledged assistance to implement the plan, which is due Oct. 5.

While these efforts are commendable, the board has still not addressed the local problems on primary day, said Council President George L. Leventhal, who asked the officials a series of questions about the voter access cards that were left out of precinct supply bags.

"There was a chain of bad decisions that were made that contributed to the error," said Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park. "At some point there has to be some accountability. It was much worse than what the board's leadership at the county level seems to accept."

The missing access cards,

which operate electronic voting machines, forced early morning voters to use provisional ballots until the cards could be delivered. Although voting was extended until 9 p.m., anyone who wanted to cast a ballot after 8 p.m. had to use a paper ballot. Some precincts ran out of those ballots.

"The lesson learned here is that you need a backup system and you need it there on-site, along with very clear instructions that are communicated and followed by key people," said Jurgensen, who disagreed with Leventhal's criticism.

Because the board could not contact its elections judges, some precinct workers were not told about the extra hour of voting.

"We were the laughingstock of the nation. There were problems elsewhere, but our problems seemed worse," said Councilman Howard A. Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase.

Denis said his office has heard from several residents who will not return to the polls in November. "I'm concerned that the systems that you are putting in place may not be enough," he told Dacek and Jurgensen.

Jurgensen said changes could be implemented after an audit of the board's administrative procedures is completed. The \$35,000 audit being conducted by reviewers of The Elections Center, a Houston-based trade organization, began Monday. A preliminary report is due Oct. 16, with the final report expected at the end of October. A reviewer for the organization had to be replaced last week after critics questioned a conflict of interest because she had worked with Montgomery elections officials before.